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SUBJECT: QUIET CAMPAIGNING FOR FNC ELECTIONS

REFS: ABU DHABI 4406 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A mild sense of anticipation has candidates and the public watching for results of the first UAE Federal National Council (FNC) limited elections to take place December 16, 18, and ¶20. The 14-day campaign period for 20 FNC seats ends December 14; candidates have promoted their electoral platforms through posters, small (often poorly attended) gatherings, and quite extensively through the local media and advertising. General commitments to address broad topics, like unemployment or education, are the closest thing to "campaign promises" being made; few have offered specific plans for dealing with topics raised. UAE officials persist in praising the election process, stressing the importance of political participation, and urging Electoral College (EC) members to vote. End summary.

Campaigning less than dramatic  
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¶2. (SBU) For 14 days, candidates have promoted themselves in various ways (banners, posters and placards on city streets and squares, newspaper ads of varying levels of sophistication) in an effort to secure votes for the first limited parliamentary elections in the country. Candidates' general platforms include promises to address unemployment, health, education, FNC authority, women, inflation, and the UAE's "demographic structure." Candidates are not offering focused plans or strategies. While the UAEG continues its media campaign to draw attention to the vote, many commentators still publicly question the merits and qualifications of members on the list (all 400-plus candidates having come from among the 6,000 appointed "electors"). The recent withdrawal of 17 candidates drew attention, but may have been due to the candidates' realization of their own low prospects of winning a seat or a belated realization of the challenge of mounting a public campaign.

¶3. (U) Campaign tactics included setting up tents, holding individual or joint press conferences, small gatherings, dinners, erecting street banners, inserting ads in local newspapers, launching websites, and reaching out to electors via e-mail and text messaging. Most candidates who advertised in the press were from the more populous emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah, but campaign advertising has been evident on main streets and squares even in smaller, backwater communities like Al Dheid, Khorfakkan, and the east coast emirate of Fujairah. Semi-official Arabic daily "Al-Ittihad" launched a special supplement entitled "Elections '06" that covered the last five days of campaigns. Local press reported that orientation sessions arranged by the government were poorly attended and that tents set up by candidates were limited in number, raising concerns about lack of interest in the process. A survey of 800 residents (UAE national and expatriate) conducted by an official at Dubai e-government revealed that only 24 percent know of the upcoming FNC elections.

UAEG support for female candidates  
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¶4. (U) At the direction of Sheikha Fatima, wife of the late President Sheikh Zayed, the newly established Family Development Foundation offered its support to women candidates during the

campaign by opening all of its branches around the country for women candidates to hold seminars and meetings with potential voters. The Minister of State for FNC Affairs Anwar Gargash has stated his hope that women will be elected in more than one emirate and told the press that women will likely be appointed before the next FNC session (the remaining 20 seats in the 40-seat FNC are to be appointed by the rulers of each emirate).

#### Official press for participation

15. (SBU) During the December 11 cabinet meeting, Vice-President and Prime Minister Sheikh Mohamed bin Rashid urged all EC members to vote, saying it is their duty to participate in this process; he promised one day of leave to facilitate voting in their respective emirates (Abu Dhabi and Fujairah leading off on the 16th). Dr. Gargash welcomed all local civil society organization to observe elections. FNC Secretary General Mohammed Al-Mazrooei remarked to Embassy officers December 14 that the FNC had historically discussed issues like education and health care, the same issues being raised by candidates in the current elections. He looked forward to the evolution of a semi-elected body and suggested that younger FNC members in particular might change the nature of the debate; he said the median age of previous FNC membership was 50.

#### Mechanisms

16. (U) The National Election Commission announced the locations of polling stations, one per emirate with 12 electronic polling machines and one machine for electors with disabilities. Election simulations have tested the voting machines and the UAEG anticipates no problems.

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